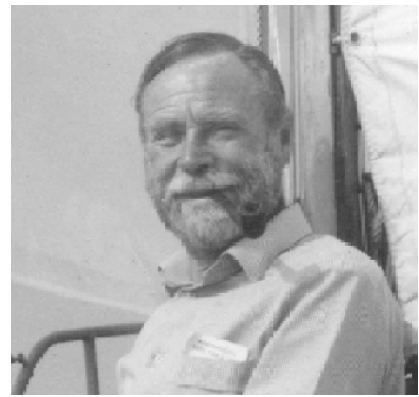




**David Eyton-Jones**



**His story**

**Autumn 2005**

Sept 1939 At a large mansion in Buckinghamshire owned by David's Great Aunt, the Hon Gertrude Aird, daughter of Sir John Aird, four teenagers – David aged 16, his sister and two cousins gathered in the main drawing room with 20 staff to listen to Neville Chamberlain announcing the declaration of war against Germany. "This morning, the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany."

The housekeeper was summoned and instructed to introduce food rationing on a scheme based on his aunt's memory of the first world war. The rest of the servants were sent back to their duties.

Subsequently David learnt that his Great Aunt had donated a sum of £5000 to cover the cost of a Spitfire airframe, a scheme originated by Lord Beaverbrook, which was called Gerty in her honour.

The children also responded to the situation. They pooled their pocket money and resolved to stockpile sweets before rationing was introduced. An expedition was also planned to raid the kitchen garden of the house by night for plums and nectarines that were growing there.

In fact the onset of war signalled the end of childhood for David and his cousins.

David had been at school in Monkton Coombe, in Somerset, and after the outbreak of war was asked to return there to take part in home Guard duties. Duties consisted of being positioned on the tops of the hills around Bath as listening posts to guard against invasion. During this time, David excelled himself by firing a 303 rifle round into a bush where a bird in full song was preventing him from sleeping while he was off duty. The sound of the rifle shot caused an invasion alert in the area, and he was later severely reprimanded. The bird flew out of the bush unharmed.

David was born at Forest Hill in SE London on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1923. His father was a clergyman and Secretary to the Church Pastoral Aid Society. Both his grandfathers had also been clergymen. He had two sisters, Barbara – 3 years his elder, and Susan who was 13 years younger than him. The family lived in Walthamstow at first, and moved firstly to Kemptown, Brighton when David was six, where he spent most of his childhood, and to Streatham in 1939.

At school he enjoyed all sports, particularly Rugby and Cricket He was also captain of swimming. In those days, school was harsh by modern standards. The cane

was a regular punishment, and all the boys started the day with a cold bath. He left school in 1940 and with the assistance of some extra tuition went up to Jesus College Cambridge in 1941 to read Agriculture. He particularly enjoyed rowing for his college, and has his oar mounted on the wall of his cottage as a trophy. After five terms at Cambridge the war intervened, and he joined the army at the end of 1942.

Following basic training, and six months at an Officer Cadet Training Unit in North Wales, in April 1944 David was commissioned, and in the summer of that year



'The Empress of Scotland'

embarked on a troopship 'The Empress of Scotland' for Italy. He was in charge of a draft of 30 infantrymen to join the Royal Sussex Regiment. The ship was part of a convoy from Gourock near Glasgow to Naples via Oran, and a zig zag course was necessary because of the danger of attack by U boats. The weather was bad, which made it difficult for U boats to attack the convoy, but resulted in a great deal of seasickness on board. The convoy reached Oran, where bomb damage was very evident, before arriving safely at Naples, which seemed

comparatively peaceful, in the Autumn of 1944. Unfortunately, he could not find his regiment – they had gone to Greece – so he volunteered for Special Operations with the 2<sup>nd</sup> SAS Regiment.

SOE (Special Operations Executive) wanted to attack the Germans from behind their lines, and to do this they needed to mobilise and train the partisans in the northern part of the Apennines. David was chosen for the operation – Operation



Dakota aircraft dropping parachutists in WW 11

Tombola - lead by Major Roy Farran. After two weeks training with the SAS, on the night of March 7<sup>th</sup> 1945 David parachuted behind the German Lines from a Dakota with two other SAS soldiers, the second 'stick' or group to go in. This was a night parachute jump into enemy held territory, jumping into mountainous terrain in very cold conditions. The training had been so brief that not

only had he never made a night jump, this was his first actual parachute jump. On the 8<sup>th</sup> March, he celebrated his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday with Farmhouse Grappa in the Apennine countryside.

A number of air drops provided weapons for the force who linked up with local Italian partisans and a group of seventy escaped Russians.

The group ambushed convoys and were able to attack German 51 Corps

headquarters, based at two villas in the Tuscan Apennines; cut roads and shell a number of installations.

Before any attack was made, an escape route had to be planned. If the Germans suspected that villages had helped the SAS and partisans, they carried out terrible reprisals. The German Commander, Field Marshal Kesselring also ordered that any SAS soldiers caught should be shot. For this reason escape routes were often made



Monte Cusna (2121m)

at night over high mountains which made it difficult for the Germans to pursue. In the course of reconnoitering an escape route over Monte Cusna (2121m), for the attack on the German HQ, climbing through deep snow, without skis, snowshoes, goggles or any specialist equipment, David suffered painfully frostbitten toes and snowblindness, causing him temporary loss of sight. The map had indicated a mountain hut, a suitable place of shelter, high on the mountain but when David at last reached it, it was full of snow. Nevertheless David

and his colleague had no choice but to sleep in the hut. Slowly through the night, tucked up in their sleeping bags, they sank through the deep snow, so that by morning they woke to find themselves contained by walls of snow on all sides. Subsequently it was decided that this route was too difficult to be a practical escape route.

On returning from Monte Cusna, David found that the SAS forces were moving eastwards through the foothills leading to the Po valley. Four jeeps had been dropped by parachute near the village of Quara. Each jeep was suspended from four large parachutes. Unfortunately the parachutes from one vehicle became entangled and it fell like a bomb deep into the ground and was wrecked. David took charge of the remaining three jeeps.

A day or two later in the early morning, there was the sight of an American aircraft overhead with smoke and flames pouring out of an engine. Three parachutes appeared in the sky. This was part of the crew baling out. David took one of the jeeps and the Italian quartermaster, Barba Nera, and raced towards them. They landed in a field and as David approached, he could see that beyond them on the other side of a river was a German Volkswagen troop carrier trying to find a place to cross. David's jeep reached the three airmen first. The pilot started to berate his navigator for saying that they were in hostile country but David confirmed that the Germans were close by so that they hurried into the jeep and drove back to the foothills. The plane exploded a couple of miles to the north and the German vehicle disappeared in that direction. The Italian quartermaster took the three Americans to concealment in a farmhouse. Years later it was revealed that another six crew members had joined them and all survived until the American breakthrough.

In April, Roy Farran summoned all the British officers to a meeting. A radio signal

had been received from SOE and the Allied Forces Advance HQ in Florence. It was the go ahead for continual attacks to be made on the German lines of communication to tie up with the spring offensive by the British and American armies. The jeeps and the mountain howitzer were to be brought down into the foothills overlooking the Po valley.

David was to activate and lead the Italian Company. In addition to about 50 armed Italians with their own officer, there was a British corporal to assist him, and a Spanish member of the SAS who could act as an interpreter.

The target for the Italian company was all German transport on Route 12 over the mountains between the village of Pavullo and Montfestino, which included the staging post of Montebenello. David moved the Italians to within 5 miles of Route 12, and after they had had a meal, advanced across country bypassing



David in Battledress in Italy

Montebenello to reach the main road. It was difficult going and the large body of Italians made so much noise that the dogs in every farmhouse started barking.

They reached the main road and positioned themselves on either side of the road and waited for two hours, but no German convoys approached from either direction. They left in order to reach their temporary headquarters before daylight.

David decided that the size of the column was too large to carry out operations without excessive noise, and told Corporal Ford, a veteran of the SAS to take out a smaller party the following night.

The small force crossed the area to the main road by a different route and saw a German column of vehicles and horse-drawn transport retreating northwards along Route 12. They opened fire with all the machine guns and rifles they had, causing a commotion and several vehicles caught fire. Their task completed, they rapidly retired by the shortest route which passed rather too close to Montebenello from where they were fired upon, but managed to escape.

David did a daylight reconnaissance the following day, approaching to a hill called Monteforco which was within 800 yds of Montebenello. They took compass bearings on the church spire in Montebenello where there was reputed to be a German observation post from which wireless aerials could be seen protruding.



A Brownings Heavy Machine Gun

Under the cover of nightfall, they carried heavy machine guns on the backs of mules to Monteforco and laid their aim on the compass bearings previously recorded. Belts of ammunition were loaded with tracer, armour piercing, and high explosive rounds. When all was ready, David gave the order for the

machine guns and 2 inch mortars to open fire. Continuous fire was kept up until all ammunition had been used up and the barrels of the Browning machine guns glowed red hot.

There were several explosions in Montebenello as it appeared that at least one convoy of vehicles was on fire. German return fire started as David and his company withdrew. The German fire followed them for a mile until the early hours of daylight. David then gathered the rest of the company and straight away they

started moving towards the Po valley where the last of the German convoys could be seen driving northwards. There was now no need to lead the partisans - they were striding homewards.

During the German retreat north to the Po valley, David, leading a force of 50 partisans was in the village of Sassuolo when he heard the rumble of tracked vehicles. The first vehicle was an American scout car. David approached the vehicle and every gun was pointed at him. The American officer questioned him in Italian and David replied in English. The advancing Americans were deflated to learn that David and his SAS colleagues had been in the area for two months.



The medal given to David by the Italian authorities

With the American advance, David still had difficult tasks to perform – burying the bodies of three colleagues killed in the operation, and later disarming some of the 50 Russian troops who had taken part in the SAS operation. These were Russians who had been conscripted into the German army when their homeland was overrun, who then deserted the German army and fought against them as partisans. On orders from Allied Command in Italy, who acted on the direct orders of Winston Churchill, the Russians were disarmed and put on a train from Italy to Russia. Many years later, to his horror, David learnt that when they arrived in Russia, on the orders of Stalin, they were shot.

In 1987 David attended an SAS reunion in Bologna and has a medal given to him by the Italian authorities.

When hostilities ceased, David returned to the UK on a troopship to Liverpool. The SAS was disbanded and he joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment for a period as part of the occupying force in Italy. In 1947 the battalion embarked at Venice on the 'City of Canterbury' for Port Said, and thence to Palestine for a six month tour of duty, based just north of Gaza. This was a difficult dangerous time with Jewish terror groups active against British troops. Despite the dangers, he managed to visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem at the army's expense. During this time, his commanding officer from his SAS days, Major Roy Farran was arrested for the murder of a Jewish Youth. David visited him while on remand in a Ramallah jail guarded by troops of the Royal Sussex Regiment. Roy Farran was subsequently acquitted, and returned to the UK.

After this, David was de-mobbed, and initially went to work for his uncle, a GP in Brighton, who was trying to get his paperwork up to date ahead of the introduction of the National Health Service. During this time he played Golf and Tennis, and it was on the Tennis Court he met Diana, his future wife, who had also been brought up in Brighton. It was love at first sight.

Wanting to find employment in agriculture, David formed a landscape gardening partnership at Loxwood near Horsham, despite his fathers wish that he should return to Cambridge to study theology. At that time, he didn't feel called. He married Diana on Feb 5<sup>th</sup> 1949 and initially they lived in a caravan at Loxwood.

When his partner in the landscaping business got TB and was unable to continue

working, David looked for another job. Through the Officers Association he heard of a company who needed an Assistant Manager for a Tea Estate in Assam, India.

David and Diana went out to India in January 1950 on the P & O steamer 'Himalaya'. They arrived in Bombay and stayed at the Taj Hotel before taking the Train from Bombay to Calcutta, a journey of over 2000km that took 3 days. From Calcutta they flew to Assam by Dakota aircraft.

Diana, despite being pregnant with their first child Ruth, loved it. Ruth was born in a Welsh Mission Hospital hill station on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1950, just as the Monsoon broke.



The Christening

On hearing the news, David drove through the night to be with Diana and their new child, a distance of 150 miles over very poor roads, where your progress might well be halted by browsing elephants.

In August there was a minor earthquake which did some damage to the Tea processing machinery. This was a life where you had to be self sufficient and resourceful, and cope with any problems you encountered.

The after tremors of the earthquake also caused fear amongst the local population. At the onset of a tremor, workers set up a great wailing sound, and this in turn caused monkeys in the nearby forests who made a similar truly eerie sound.



Diana and Ruth

Communications with the outside world, replacement parts and lifes luxuries all came by steamer navigating the Brahmaputra River, which also shipped out the Tea and Jute from neighbouring estates. There were no telephones, or television, but there was a telegram service.

In 1951, there was a slump in the Tea business, and in an effort to cut costs, the company retired one of the managers and asked David to take over as acting Manager. At 27 this was quite a remarkable responsibility - most managers were appointed in their 40's,



Penelope's Christening

David stayed for 11 years, managing 750 acres, 750 employees, and the associated infrastructure of this remote community – a hospital, dispensary, two schools and the workers houses. Added to these responsibilities, David also had to adjudicate on his employees personal problems and disputes.

During this time, he got to know the workers and families by name. The regime was tolerant of religious and ethnic differences. David's first assistant was a Sikh. Although this



Tea Pickers in Assam

was after independence, in effect the style of the British Raj continued under the new regime (until 1960). David put in a new water supply for his workers, This required drilling a 150 ft well and this had the immediate benefit for all with reduced sickness amongst workers and their families that also benefited the business. He also introduced a crèche for small children, a canteen for the workers, and a fence around the factory to protect the workers and factory from animals and to reduce theft by outsiders.

Tigers live in that part of India, and they were naturally a cause for alarm amongst workers picking tea on the estate. One day, David was told that a Tiger was in the tea and the women had stopped picking. The women did most of the picking, and the men did the hoeing to keep down weeds, and the processing of

the tea. David went out to face the Tiger with a twelve bore shot gun and a Beretta .32 automatic pistol. He walked all over the area but, perhaps fortunately, found no trace of the tiger. At least this gave the workers the confidence to return to work. But later there were further reports of a tiger, and David again returned, this time with two dogs. The dogs disturbed a large Gecko, which David shot, and this was said by the workers to have been very good eating. However one of the dogs also disturbed a hornets nest, and David had to resort to driving his Landrover, together with the dog and countless hornets at high speed half a mile to the river so the dog could jump into the river to escape the hornets. The Tiger was never found, and perhaps had never been there, but the workers were reassured.



The Bungalow

His family – four children - grew up with India as home. They enjoyed a Bungalow with views to the west looking out over the Brahmaputra river, north to the



The Brahmaputra River with a local boat

Himalayas, and east over the Tea estate. It was, in David's view, the finest bungalow in Assam.

Hard work in the picking season, and remote from other outposts, nevertheless there was an ex-patriate community that organized a social life. One highlight was an invitation to the Queen's reception when she visited Calcutta in 1961.

During this time, David was able to enjoy

some sailing on the Brahmaputra in a GP14 built to the correct design from solid teak. The river here was 3 miles wide even in the dry season swelling to 6 miles wide after the monsoons.

David also acted as the steamer agent for Kilburn and Co. On one occasion as a result of an altercation between a Hindu and the steamer crew, who were mostly Muslims, David had to take action to avoid a riot. A man had been seeing off his mother on the ferry across the

Brahmaputra, and inadvertently failed to get off the boat before it sailed. The crew refused to turn back and there was a full and frank exchange of views that led to religious taunting and abuse as the ferry made its way across the river. David, alerted to the problem, and aware that such minor disagreements could very easily turn into bloody riots, set out in his GP14 to intercept the steamer. Aware that a mob armed with sticks had gathered to greet the steamer he prevented it berthing and directed it to return the next morning. He then sent an urgent message to the nearest town to send armed police to be on hand the next day. They arrived in time, and, taking orders from David, positioned themselves between the steamer berth and the crowd, and fixed bayonets. The crowd was suitably impressed and fortunately there was no riot.



A Brahmaputra river steamer with barges secured alongside - image from a paperweight made for the Joint Steamer Companies, a memento belonging to David



The Family, c.1961

In 1962, David returned to the UK. The company had been sold to an Indian company who wanted an Indian manager. Back in the UK, David found it difficult to find suitable employment. Eventually he approached the Secretary of the Royal Forestry Society who knew of a company, Wealden Woodland who needed someone to manage the landscaping of industrial sites and were opening a new branch at Godalming. So David and Diana moved to Godalming, buying the first house that they could call their own.

They were there for 20 years. During this time, David had a sailing boat 'Widgeon', that he kept at Emsworth. He had been introduced to sailing in Langstone Harbour just after the war. By this time all the children had moved away except for Gerald, so when he was offered retirement at 60, the opportunity to make a new life nearer the coast was attractive. In fact David had had some involvement with Chidham before this when, in his landscaping days, he had planted Chestnut trees and Corsican Pines at Manor Farm. So in January 1984, Wadeway Cottage, a Grade 2 listed building, at that time called 'Crooked Chimney', came on the market, and David and Diana moved to Chidham. The house had originally been called Wadeway Cottage because at high tides, the water came over the road. This was before the embankment had been constructed.

Having moved in on the Friday, David and Diana went to church on the Sunday, a



Wadeway Cottage

break from all the unpacking. Norman Smith was interested to meet the new arrivals and visited them to bless the house.

In the 1987 'hurricane' the chimney blew down. This was a blessing in disguise because smoke had tended to blow into the room when the wind was from the east. David took the opportunity to get it put right, with professional advice from Peter Hyatt. At the same time he changed the name of the cottage back to its original name of Wadeway Cottage.



'Widgeon'

David enjoyed life in Chidham. He sailed 'Widgeon' with Diana in the Solent. 'Widgeon' was a 20' wooden sloop with a drop keel and a 4hp Stuart Turner petrol engine built in Christchurch that David converted to a cutter rig. He got permission to lay a mooring towards Cut Mill, and at high tide he could row out to his boat from the embankment.



David on board 'Widgeon'

However David found there were many other things to keep him busy besides sailing. He was a tree warden for a couple of years, and Governor of Chidham school for a time. He was elected to the PCC in his first year in the Parish, and was variously Secretary, Treasurer, Deanery Synod member and Church Warden.

Donald Web had been running the 10 am Family Service at St Wilfrid's because Norman Smith maintained the 11am service at St Mary's.



The Family Service c1990

When Donald Web died in 1986, David took over the family service on the second Sunday of each month, supported by Delph Archer, Alyzn Johnson and Sue Heath, as well as preaching at St Mary's on the first Sunday. David trained as a licensed reader and was inducted at Seaford in 1988.



The Glass goblet presented to David by Chidham Church

As Church Warden with Peter Hyatt he was responsible for the upkeep of the fabric of the church, and was involved in the replacement of the wooden flooring, and the repairs to the belfry and roof, as well as the roof of St Wilfrid's that were necessary after damage from the 1987 hurricane.

Diana supported fund raising and social events in aid of the Church. She made a type of chocolate biscuit called Chidham mud which always sold out quickly on the cake-stall, as well as arranging cream teas in the garden of Wadeway Cottage when Chidmere Gardens were open to the public.

After Norman Smith left, David had to manage the renovation of the Vicarage gardens, carried out by Arthur Cooper, Sid Baldwin and other village people, that had become totally overgrown to the extent that the casual passerby might be completely

unaware that there was a substantial property there.

During the interregnum, David and Peter Hyatt as Churchwardens arranged for all the church services to continue with the help of members of the PCC. David officiated at all services of Matins and Evensong for nine months with the help of Don Claridge.

When the Chichester Branch of the Royal Sussex Regimental Association asked him to become their Chaplain, he accepted.



David, Chaplain of the Chichester Branch, the Royal Sussex Regimental Association, at the service to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II

Sadly the most frequent responsibility was to conduct the funerals of old soldiers and prepare eulogies. This was a difficult job but always much appreciated by the family of the deceased.

David arranged services in St Mary's for the Royal Sussex Regimental Association including a Dunkirk memorial service, and the service to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II.

Sadly Diana died at Wadeway Cottage in 1997. David had been looking after her for two years through her illness.

David has now lived in Chidham for over 20 years. Since Diana's death, he has lived on his own. He had to cope with the exceptional floods of 1994 that invaded Wadeway Cottage. He enjoys his life in Chidham and in the Church and feels that, like his father, he had had a calling. Although it had come later in life to him, he has made his contribution to the Church and also to Chidham.



David at home in Wadeway Cottage



David and a new generation

## A KNIGHT'S PRAYER

MY LORD, I am ready on the threshold of this new day, to go forth armed with Thy power, seeking adventure on the highroad, to right wrong, to overcome evil, to suffer wounds and endure pain if need be, but in all things to serve Thee bravely, faithfully, joyfully, that at the end of the day's labour, kneeling for Thy blessing, Thou mayest find no blot upon my shield.